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Committee on Conferences
Substantive session of 2004

Draft report

Addendum

Rapporteur: Mr. Mu'taz **Hyassat** (Jordan)

II. Calendar of conferences and meetings

C. Improved utilization of conference-servicing resources and facilities

1. United Nations Office at Nairobi

1. At its 459th meeting, on 8 September 2004, the Committee on Conferences considered paragraphs 22 to 24 of the report of the Secretary-General on pattern of conferences (A/59/159) concerning the utilization of conference facilities at the United Nations Office at Nairobi. The Committee learned that there had been steady progress and improvement in the utilization of facilities at Nairobi since the establishment of a permanent interpretation service in 2001, making Nairobi the only conference centre in Africa with the capacity to interpret in six languages. The modernization of the Nairobi conference facilities was well along in the planning stage. The adoption of the Electronic Meetings Planning and Resource Allocation System at Headquarters under the integrated global management initiative had helped to streamline conference management. However, Nairobi, alone among the duty stations, still received only approximately 50 per cent of its funding from regular budget allocations.

Discussion

2. Much concern was expressed that the high proportion of extrabudgetary to regular budget funding might hamper progress at the United Nations Office at Nairobi and might be adding to the difficulty of attracting qualified candidates to fill translation and interpretation posts, along with the lack of security in Nairobi and the scarcity of employment opportunities for spouses, among other things. There was also competition from other conference centres in Africa. Delegations thought

that new methods were needed to attract more meetings to Nairobi. A request was made for a list of meetings held at Nairobi.

2. Conference centre at the Economic Commission for Africa

3. At the same meeting, the Committee considered paragraphs 25 to 30 of the report of the Secretary-General, which provide an overview of efforts to improve utilization of the facilities at the conference centre at the Economic Commission for Africa and the handicaps to be overcome.

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II. Improved utilization of conference-servicing resources and facilities

D. Improving the performance of the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management

Introduction and overview

1. At its 457th and 458th meetings, on 7 September 2004, the Committee on Conferences considered the report of the Secretary-General on the reform of the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management (A/59/172). In introducing the report, the Under-Secretary-General for General Assembly and Conference Management stated that reform had been closely integrated into the work of the Department and had turned into a mechanism for ensuring the continuous dynamics of its operations in a complex and fluid environment. The transition from conference servicing to conference management was nearing completion as a result of the synchronization of the various projects undertaken during the previous two years. Integration within the Department had been enhanced to achieve full-system benefits. The Department's information technology strategy had been geared towards the priorities of reform, and the enhanced sense of accountability and responsibility had extended beyond the Department. Finally, the Department had continued to focus on results, not only in terms of quality, quantity, timeliness and cost-effectiveness, but also in terms of user-friendliness.

2. The success of the reform, however, depended on the joint efforts of the Secretariat and Member States, which should create the conditions necessary for the Department to achieve results. With regard to the control and limitation of documentation, the Department needed clearer encouragement for the Secretariat's efforts to consolidate reports and stronger endorsement of the application of the

20-page limit for reports not within the purview of the Secretariat, as well as more aggressive application of the drafting guidelines issued to submitting departments. A request to Member States to exercise restraint in communications would also be of great help. On meeting planning and the availability of documentation, the scheduling of programmes of work should be better coordinated with documentation-processing needs. The Department also needed the continued support of Member States for its efforts at integrated global management, clear guidance on the handling of summary records and endorsement for continuing the study of workload standards and performance measurement.

3. The Under-Secretary-General stressed that of the four most often used indicators, namely, quality, quantity, timeliness and cost-effectiveness, no undue emphasis should be placed on any one at the expense of the others. Progress would occur in stages and, in the near term, was most manifest in terms of the timeliness of the issuance of documentation and the cost-effectiveness of operations, with the Department staying within its budgetary allocations, especially in the use of temporary assistance and overtime, as a result of the transition from a crisis-management mode to one of proactive conference management.

4. At the same meetings, the Committee also considered informal papers on the integrated global management of conference services (the report of the fifth Coordination Meeting of Conference Managers), the work of the Task Force on Workload Standards and Performance Measurement in 2003 and 2004 and summary records.

5. Representatives of the conference-servicing units at the United Nations Office at Geneva, the United Nations Office at Vienna and the United Nations Office at Nairobi participated via videoconference in the Committee's 459th meeting, on 8 September 2004, on recent developments concerning integrated global management at their respective duty stations.

Discussion

Technical secretariat support

6. The Department was commended on its reform efforts and its contribution to the revitalization of the General Assembly. Some felt, however, that improvements were still needed in a number of areas, including greater accountability, the timely submission and issuance of documents and better quality control of outputs. The view was also expressed that distortions of meaning during translation were still all too frequent, even in sensitive documents. The satisfaction of Member States should not be the only criterion for assessing quality, and improved mechanisms were needed to measure performance.

7. At the same time, however, there was need for a deliberate and balanced approach to reform that took account of the particular characteristics of the different units at Headquarters and of duty stations away from Headquarters. Innovations in technology and management should be considered from the perspective of full-system benefits, and pilot projects should be conducted over limited areas to ensure that mistakes did not negatively affect the entire system.

Conference management

8. Concerning the access of regional and other major groupings to the Electronic Meetings Planning and Resource Allocation System (e-Meets) and some difficulties in having requests for meeting rooms satisfied through the System, the Secretariat recalled that under the relevant legislative mandate, ad hoc requests for meeting rooms from non-calendar bodies, such as regional groups, could be met only on an as-available basis and could normally be confirmed only close to the actual date of the proposed meeting. In such cases, therefore, human intervention in the electronic system was still required. At the same time, e-Meets was being further developed to provide Member States broader access to profiles of all the regional groups to which they belonged. More briefings for Member States on how to use the System were also planned.

9. Concern was expressed about the complexity of the electronic documentation management system (e-Docs), in particular the electronic processing of documents, which was the crucial link between submission and issuance. It was noted that the timely issuance of documentation was a perennial problem and that the slotting mechanism for the submission of documents had brought about an improvement in the timeliness of issuance in 2004. Timely issuance, however, required a joint effort by the Secretariat and Member States, and the Department had worked hard to raise awareness of the need for the timely submission of documents and to develop ways of strengthening accountability. Nevertheless, timely submission was sometimes affected by the need to include late-breaking developments in reports, to coordinate reports among various United Nations agencies and to compile replies from the Governments of Member States. The Department, moreover, tried to no longer penalize early submitters by diverting resources to process documents that were submitted late.

10. Some members cautioned that printing on demand should be viewed not only as a means of reducing costs but also of enhancing the efficiency of the electronic workflow. It was pointed out that the main purpose of the system was not to cut costs but to improve the quality of the service provided to Member States by maximizing the impact of the electronic workflow. Printing on demand, moreover, was an additional option, and printed copies of documents were still available.

11. On the subject of the integrated global management of conference services, clarification was sought about the cost of providing services at duty stations away from Headquarters, opportunities for workload sharing, the implications of recourse to translation companies and the application of uniform contractual rates at all duty stations. It was pointed out that improvements had been made in harmonizing approaches among the various duty stations. The ultimate goal was to develop a manual of conference service policies for all duty stations, including the regional commissions. A proposal was made to share rosters of external contractors among duty stations, and efforts were being made to coordinate and exchange best practices, including in the field of information technology. The proposal had been made to apply uniform contractual rates, since different rates would lead to competition among duty stations for what was a limited pool of qualified service providers. The specific needs of certain duty stations, however, would still need to be taken into account. Recourse to translation companies for translations into all languages had been proposed as a means of expanding the pool of contractual service providers. In the area of coordination, interest was expressed in participating

in the forthcoming coordination meeting of conference managers. Coordination with the specialized agencies of the United Nations took place at the annual Inter-Agency Meeting on Language Arrangements, Documentation and Publications.

12. On the subject of workload standards and performance measurement, concern was expressed at the quantity and quality of conference service outputs. As part of the Department's ongoing reform efforts, the Task Force on Workload Standards and Performance Management had been focused thus far on the quantitative indicators of performance but would turn its attention to the quality of output during the next stage of its work. Performance evaluation by Member States was being strengthened by the establishment of a web site for the posting of comments and feedback. Some members argued that the standards used to measure performance should take into account the special characteristics and difficulties of some languages.

13. Some members cautioned that new information technology should be introduced only after careful analysis of its full-system benefits. A targeted approach should also be adopted with regard to the training of language staff in the use of the new technology in order to avoid any negative impact on productivity. The criteria for recruitment of new translators might be expanded to include the ability to use the computer and to type.

14. Information was sought on the progress that had been made in determining the unit costs of the various conference-servicing outputs. Clarification was also sought as to why the time was not ripe to introduce changes in the existing workload standards. In response, the Secretariat pointed out that the issue of workload standards and performance measurement was a very complex one with many ramifications and facets. The Task Force had made a serious effort to understand the background of the issue and to identify all the factors that affected the productivity and performance of language staff. It had gone beyond seeking to measure the impact of information technology alone and had examined other important factors that influenced the output of language staff, such as the complexity or specialized nature of the subject and the quality of the material. Some uses of technology, such as keyboarding by translators, could actually lower output, although, from a full-system perspective, a drop in individual productivity might be acceptable if sufficient savings or efficiencies were generated downstream. Tasks of a more clerical nature, such as scheduling, making assignments, managing workflow, record keeping and automatically generating statistical reports, could be greatly facilitated by information technology, but other more intellectual functions, such as editing and translation, were not easily amenable to automation. The Task Force saw its contribution so far as providing a comprehensive survey of the situation in different conference service groups, which could guide future and more detailed work on designing a more comprehensive array of indicators on which the Department's performance should be judged.

15. The Department had adopted a number of measures to expedite the issuance of summary records and had explored additional alternatives to reduce costs, streamline the process and make the provision of summary records more efficient and effective. Five options were presented in the report of the Secretary-General for consideration by Member States. The options were to replace summary records with digital records, reduce the number of bodies entitled to summary records, concentrate précis-writing in the English Translation Service, restrict the length of summary records to a predetermined maximum number of words and to eliminate

publishing and distribution costs if Member States could agree to have access only to electronic versions of summary records for downloading and printing by users as necessary.

16. Several members expressed interest in the option of replacing summary records with digital recordings as a way of achieving an immediate reduction in costs. It was suggested that a pilot exercise might be conducted in which, in addition to the printed copies of summary records, digital recordings were also made available. It was further pointed out that the provision of summary records to certain bodies was mandated in their rules of procedure. Some members argued for the retention of traditional summary records, which represented the official record and institutional memory of the bodies concerned. Interest was also expressed in the option of concentrating précis-writing in the English Translation Service, which had traditionally borne the bulk of the précis-writing function. That approach would also reduce to some extent the delay in the translation of summary records, since the other services had a greater capacity to translate directly from English than from Russian, Spanish or even French. That option could be combined with the option of restricting the length of summary records to a predetermined maximum. One member also expressed the view that none of the options adequately addressed the question of how to expedite the issuance of summary records, the value of which was in inverse proportion to the delay in issuance.

17. The suggestion was made that mandatory deadlines might be introduced for the issuance of summary records. It was noted, however, that the cost estimates that would have to be prepared were likely to be very high and that existing priorities would have to be adjusted. As all of the options presented had clear advantages and disadvantages, the Secretariat was requested to pursue the delivery of summary records in a more efficient and cost-effective manner in full consultation with all the relevant intergovernmental bodies. The Secretariat was also requested to pursue the options concerning summary records put forward in its report, to study their practical and financial implications and to make recommendations for their implementation, as appropriate, in the form of a pilot project, to the General Assembly at its sixtieth session.